

WHEELING INTELLIGENCER (W. VA.)

30 April 1980

Not Their Role

Admiral Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, created an uproar among American journalists recently when he said he sees nothing wrong with recruiting overseas employees of U.S. news organizations as spies. The statement should cause all Americans to be equally concerned.

A major flap resulted a few years back when it was revealed that the CIA had been using American journalists overseas for covert intelligence gathering duties. George Bush, then CIA director, announced in 1976 that the practices would be halted. And Turner, in 1977, reiterated the policy—with a loophole that didn't get much attention at the time: he said the exception would be if the director specifically gave his approval.

However, appearing before the annual convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington earlier this month, Turner said he endorses the idea of recruiting a journalist for CIA duties "when it is vitally important to the nation." Turner, who also reversed a previous stand and refused to promise that CIA agents wouldn't pose as journalists, said, "I think a lot of correspondents are patriotic enough to do this."

We don't dispute that most journalists are patriotic, but

Turner misses the point. Namely, that the use of even one journalist for CIA purposes would have an adverse effect on all journalists working overseas for American news organizations. Their integrity and independence would be compromised. And the discovery of a CIA agent posing as a journalist would cast suspicion on all journalists.

The job of U.S. journalists is to report the news fairly and accurately. And to do this they must be totally independent. A connection with the CIA or any other government agency would have the potential for two things: drying up news sources overseas (not everyone wants to talk with a newsman who also may be a CIA spy) and destroying the confidence of those back home (a reader could but wonder about the objectivity of a newsman serving two masters).

The New York Times put it this way: "We argue from the premise that free American inquiry around the world has a greater value than any occasional intelligence mission."

Most major American news organizations with representatives overseas prohibit those employees from working for the CIA on the side, and rightly so. Journalists are the eyes and ears of the public, and their objectivity should not be compromised.